Note by LMB: This was written in response to various on-line debates about fan fiction, just then undergoing its internet-driven modern explosion. The *CityPages* link mentioned in the last paragraph seems to be long dead, alas.

"Here's Looking At You, Kid..."

The first point needing to be understood is that fan fiction is not a new phenomenon. The Sherlock Holmes stories were generating fan fiction in the author's lifetime, and more thereafter; fan groups such as "The Baker Street Irregulars," which included some quite notable professional writers, collected around Conan Doyle's stories. Works included privately circulated pastiches, published tales "with the serial numbers filed off" such as August Derleth's "Solar Pons" stories, and, if I recall correctly, some estate-authorized published stories as well. As the original copyrights now slide into public domain, this mini-genre continues to this day, with Holmes appearing as a character in professionally published stories and novels by many different writers–and, of course, in fan fiction.

The case has been made that the phenomenon goes back even further–that the Arthurian cycle is medieval fan fiction, with different writers in different places picking up on their favorite Knights of the Table Round and associated characters to carry the tales forward in a multitude of ways according to taste. (Some of it bad.) The division between amateur and professional writing can hardly be said to have existed before printing was invented, but as soon as it was, the argument was on. What is considered one of the first modern novels in Western literature, Cervantes' *Don Quixote,* spawned an immediate sequel by another (and inferior) writer as soon as it became popular, prodding an irate Cervantes to hurry and write the second part and get it into print to compete with his pirate! Some of the great writer's complaints about the matter sound quite modern–or perhaps they are simply timeless.

People do not sign on to "endure the unexquisite agony of writing," as Edward Gorey puts it, because they are indifferent to stories, but because they are overwhelmed by them. This joy is a good thing, withal. It leads to a new generation of writers. All writers work off a springboard of prior models which they have internalized; the boundary between "original" and "derivative" can get fuzzy, especially in genre fiction which shares by definition a joint toolbox of tropes, forms, and ideas. I have elsewhere defined a genre as "any group of works in close conversation with each other," which I think sums it up pretty well, although "argument" might be justly substituted for

"conversation," at times. Fan fiction is certainly a genre by this definition!

The next innovation to drive the modern literary scene after printing was the development in the nineteenth century of compulsory free public education, which created, for the first time in history, a mass market of readers. With a mass market came something at last resembling serious money; law and lawyers followed the money trail naturally, because it's a lot less messy than people shooting each other to settle matters. Copyright was invented and refined in modern times to address some of the obvious inequities and injustices writers were complaining about in this new mass-market literary world. Things settled down for a while; the cost and complexity of printing technology and distribution created controllable choke-points and traceable accountability.

Around the middle of the twentieth century entered the new text-reproduction techs of ditto machines and mimeographs, and suddenly almost anyone could have a mini-printing-press in their basement. In the science fiction and fantasy genre, "fanzines" sprang up. You kids can think of them as "blogs on paper," I suppose. They included everything the internet generation thinks it just invented, except slower–letters, essays, book reviews, personal memoirs, arguments, flame wars, original fiction–and fan fiction. (And later, in the '70s, slash–although I'd bet dollars to doughnuts a historian could unearth obscure examples from earlier fandoms than *Star Trek*. Holmes/Watson has got to be a sucker-bet, for one. Pre-Gutenberg Arthur/Lancelot, anyone?) Nevertheless, basement printing still could not compete with professional printing on a cost-per-unit basis, so no "basement piracy" ever developed. (The Russian "samizdat" tradition is another subject, I think, as much politics as art.) Fanzines of all sorts circulated in print runs of mere dozens, or hundreds at most. Anonymity, common to the 'net, was however rare on the fanzine scene, which is I suspect an important difference.

My own first-and-only youthful fanzine, *Star Date*, in 1969, was inspired by my seeing Devra Langsam's *Spockanalia*, and was a collaboration between myself and my best girlfriend, who also went on to become a professional writer. We laboriously typed the wax stencils, page by page, and corrected them with smelly corflu. Much of the art (electro-stenciled at The Editors' expense) was by a friend who went on to become a professional artist with dozens of books to his credit. It was run off with the help of fellow Columbus SF fan John Ayotte, on his mimeo machine in his parent's basement–John himself was pubbing a general interest fanzine at the time named *Kallikanzaros.* (Among other wonders I remember from his 'zine was the first chapter of *Nine Princes in Amber*–I believe then still in progress–which Roger Zelazny, with whom John corresponded, allowed him to print, some time before it saw professional

publication.) Our own effort, all 200 copies, retailed at fifty cents each, carefully calculated to win back paper and printing costs. Which I believe we did almost do. One of these still surfaces now and again at my book signings; I would say, "Lordy, how often do these people clean their basements?" except that I think I know.

Then came the internet, and it all exploded. People world-wide who'd never heard of science fiction fandom, or fanzines, suddenly had instant access to a brave new world. It was rather like a mutant virus getting into the international air transport system; I suspect many populations had no acquired immunity.

So, I was a reader and fan first, and a fan fiction writer pretty much simultaneously with my start at trying to write original fiction (which would be junior high school, roughly. *Succeeding* at writing original fiction came later, in my 30's.) This naturally inclines me to look on modern fanfic with a friendly or at least tolerant eye.

Money and art: Cervantes complained that his pirate was diverting sales that should have been his, and that furthermore, the other author's Don Quixote was "just not right"; that the pirate had the old don saying and doing things that offended Cervantes's sense of his character's integrity. Both these concerns still exercise writers today.

As nearly as I can tell, free fanfic does not sap sales. Extreme case in point: J.K. Rowling. Attempts to cash in on a popular author by unauthorized pastiches, like Cervantes's imitator, can still be controlled by ordinary legal means, as paper books and their distribution are eminently traceable. And e-books are not a mass market... yet.

What reading derivative work does to the artistic experience the original writer has hoped to create in the reader's mind is another matter–but it can only be answered on an individual basis, and is far too subjective to make laws about. Some people can hold the original and the derivative works separate in their minds, and can read anything without harm; others can't, so reading fanfic really does mess up the original work for them, in the place it really exists, inside their heads. The latter sort should probably not read fanfic. Or watch the movie, for that matter.

I'm a control freak with respect to my own work up to the time the galley proofs leave my hand. At that point, I believe–reluctantly–that I have to cut the umbilicus and let the work sink or swim as best it can. I have an essay titled "The Unsung Collaborator" on the topic of reader-response, which is published in my NESFA Press collection *Dreamweaver's Dilemma* (1995), and another similar one, "When World-Views Collide," which is up on my website at http://www.dendarii.com/collide.html that cover some of my thoughts on the subject generally. I won't recap them here, except to say that I don't think a book exists till someone reads it, and the cognitive

experience that results is never more than half the text writer's doing. Writers can shape, they can hope, but they can't control; fiction is a dance, not a march.

Where financial and legal issues do come around to make me, personally, wary is the nightmare scenario of some crazed fan suing the *original* writer for "stealing their ideas." This seems especially but not exclusively more likely in series work, of which I do a lot. While I'm not sure this has ever actually happened in the text end of my genre, which is not a wealthy one, it happens frequently in Hollywood, for two reasons: more money, and a much larger audience with, therefore, a larger number of nutbars in it. Movie company lawyers are justifiably adamant that any story rights bought be "squeaky clean." It is, I suppose, at least possible that my fic-tolerant stance could come around to bite me through some film company sheering off due to such rights paranoias about my work; my agent, certainly, has discouraged me from involving myself even in authorized derivative works for this reason. (Plus, I don't play well with others.) Which is why I have stopped reading fanfic of my own works, fascinating as I find it.

However, that's no bar to my reading fanfic of other sorts. I've read a smattering of fic across several fandoms, enough to get a sense of how all these different texts are sometimes being run through the same sausage-makers, and in a deep and narrow slice down one fandom, which gave me a good sense of the range of quality out there. (Superb to dire, roughly. Actually, the full bell curve goes: brilliant; pretty good; mediocre; mediocre and interminable; dire; vile; dire *and* vile; and dire, vile, *and* interminable. Among the other things amateur writers tend not to have under control is pacing. But I digress.) What I really find fascinating in fanfic is that it's a natural reader-response laboratory.

With all the other variables of story held constant, one can see in sharp relief just what a difference the writer (and their style) makes, like little story-petrie-dishes. One can *see* the difference between controlled subcreation and the mere use of characters as hand-puppets to act out the writer's own internal psychological concerns–and the interesting border area between the two. One can see *inside readers' heads*, that otherwise inaccessible stage where all this art takes place. The sense of strolling through a hall of mirrors is profound. As a writer myself, I find this not just food for thought about my craft, but a banquet.

Or maybe I just have low tastes....

I speak only for myself in this essay, obviously. But a year or two back, a reporter interviewed seven genre writers in my area; among other things, the roundtable talk touched on fanfic. Link is here:

http://www.citypages.com/databank/25/1225/article12152.asp

for some more viewpoints.